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III. — *The Three Threads of the Plot of the Iliad*

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KINGLAKE in describing his visit to the Trojan plain (*Eothen*, chap. iv) tells us that as a small boy he used to pore over Pope's translation of Homer, "and all the while the strong vertical light of Homer's poetry is blazing so full upon the people and the things of the *Iliad* that soon to the eyes of the child they grow as familiar as his mother's shawl." Who that has known one camel's-hair shawl does not feel the happiness of this comparison? The shawl was a mere mass of gay figures until we came to know it well. Then its design was seen to have definiteness, clarity, and purpose: some principle of articulation was there, closely binding together and relating to each other the many gay arabesques. It is much the same with the *Iliad*. Aristotle more than once (*Metaph.* 1045 a 13; *An. Post.* 93 b 36) makes the unity of the poem depend on its 'bonding together.' At the first reading of the *Iliad* we are likely to overlook this *σύνδεσμος* — which, like a conjunction, *ἐν ποιεῖ τὰ πολλὰ* (Arist. *Rhet.* 1413 b 33) — and to find rather a more or less inorganic mass of hero portraits, battle pictures, and episodic interludes. But if we pore over the poem until it becomes to us, as it did to Aristotle, *εὐσύνοπτον*, and if all the while we let Homer's strong vertical light play upon it, we may discover a triple strand that runs through the countless episodes, appearing with sufficient clearness to unite them all and make each contribute to a single plot of surprising definiteness and power.

Everyone recognizes in the Wrath of Achilles the chief unifying element of the poem, and different readers, or the same reader in different moods, may distinguish important minor threads. Some of these, like the rôles of Nestor or of Ajax, run through the greater part of the narrative; others link together shorter continuous or intermittent parts, for example, Diomedes or Sarpedon and Glaucus or the foreshadowed death

of Achilles, — and there are many others. But when the *Iliad* has become as familiar as a mother's shawl was to the child of a century ago, the two most important subordinate threads of the story will be found to be (1) the Plan of Zeus, by which the Wrath works out its destructiveness, and (2) the Instrument, Hector, which Zeus uses in carrying out his plan.

I

In the proem of the *Iliad* the poet tells his audience that in the woes which the Wrath brought upon the Achaeans, sending the souls of many to Hades and making their bodies a prey for dogs and birds, the βουλή of Zeus was fulfilled, Διὸς δ' ἐτελείετο βουλή. Ancient commentators offered three interpretations of Διὸς βουλή:

1. It was the result of the prayer of Earth to relieve her of overpopulation. Zeus on the advice of Momus answered her prayer not by means of his thunderbolts nor by flood, but by bringing about first the Theban, and then the Trojan, war (*Cypria*, frag. 1 Kinkel). Seeck and Robert accept this explanation. The arguments against it, if any are needed, have been given sufficiently by Wilamowitz (*Die Ilias und Homer*, 246).

2. The 'will of Zeus' is Fate. This is today the most commonly accepted interpretation. In its favor one may cite θ 82, Διὸς μεγάλου διὰ βουλᾶς, and likewise urge that if the proem was meant to introduce the story to an audience unfamiliar with the plot, the listeners could have no knowledge of any definite plan of Zeus. But there are several weighty objections to the interpretation. Jörgensen's study (*Herm.* xxxix [1904], 364 ff.) makes it extremely probable that in the *Iliad* (where the Olympians are represented so vividly as individuals), although a speaking character may mean fate or some vague divine power when he uses the name Zeus, the poet in narration when using the name of a divinity refers to that particular divinity. Yet it may be said against this that in the

proem the poet is not narrating; he is not yet the mouthpiece of the Muse, but speaks *in propria persona*. Hence, as in the similes, he may be taking the point of view of his listeners, who would naturally understand the will of the supreme divinity to be the equivalent of fate. A second objection to the proposed interpretation, however, makes this less probable. Nowhere in the proem is the Wrath, with its baneful issue, ascribed to fate by the poet. It is true that Agamemnon lays the blame on Zeus and fate (T 86 ff.), and Achilles courteously acquiesces (T 270 ff.); but this is only natural, and the poet is certainly speaking *ἐκ τοῦ προσώπου*. The other Achaeans blame Agamemnon alone, and from the poet's uniform attitude towards this hero in both *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Lang, *Homer and his Age*, 70), it seems clear that he wishes us to share in this view. But the strongest reason for not accepting the interpretation under discussion is that there is another which is decidedly better.

3. *βουλὴ Διός* means the plan which Zeus forms and carries out at the request of Thetis; so Aristophanes and Aristarchus understood it (Schol. A on A 5-6). The fact that the poet withholds the name of his hero from the proem of the *Odyssey*, and in the *Iliad* first mentions Patroclus by his patronymic alone, indicates that he did not think it necessary to give full information at the beginning. At all events the only other references in the *Iliad* to a *βουλὴ Διός* unmistakably refer to his promise to Thetis; and the definite steps in the development of the Plan, the repeated verbal echoes and backward references to it, and the three or four predictions of its outcome and limits indicate how clear it was in the mind of the poet.

II

The function of the Plan in the structure of the *Iliad*, and likewise the use of Hector as Instrument, is most easily seen by a brief glance at the four days of battle. On the fourth day the Plan has been accomplished, and the Wrath of Achilles has

been transferred, with a ten-fold fierceness, from Agamemnon to Hector. The account of the first day's fighting the poet employs, like a skilled chess-player, in developing his pieces. We notice in passing that on this day the bodies of the slain Achaeans are not left for the dogs and birds, that is, the Plan is not yet being carried out. The second day of battle, described in Θ, focuses the attention more definitely upon the Instrument, and also brings definiteness into the Plan. It is the curtain-raiser for the third day's battle, the great centerpiece of the *Iliad*. On this third day the Plan is worked out to a thrilling conclusion at the end of Ο, and then after — if not because of — a moral weakness on the part of the Instrument, involves Hector in ruin, and leads to the tragic outcome of the tale. With the beginning of Ι the Wrath takes the place of the Plan as a means of articulating the episodes.

In examining the evidence for the importance of the two minor threads of the plot let us first consider the orderly development of the *βουλὴ Διός*.

1. The Plan is very vague at first. In the interview between Zeus and Thetis there is not the slightest indication of the manner in which the request of the latter will be granted :

ἐμοὶ δέ γε ταῦτα μελήσεται, ὄφρα τελέσω. (A 523)

Compare also the words of Zeus to Hera (A 564) :

εἰ δ' οὐτω τοῦτ' ἐστίν, ἐμοὶ μέλλει φίλον εἶναι.

2. The first formulation of the Plan in the mind of Zeus, pondering in the watches of the night at the beginning of Β, is likewise lacking in definiteness. The Dream is used by Zeus merely to bring the two armies together in battle, and by the poet to introduce action into the long-standing static condition of affairs before the walls of Ilios, for, so far as the poet makes clear, Trojans and Achaeans have not yet met in formal engagement. Compare two utterances of Hector :

ἦ οὐ πω κεκόρησθε ἐελμένοι ἐνδοθι πύργων ; (Σ 287)

κακότητι γερόντων

οἳ μ' ἐθέλοντα μάχασθαι ἐπὶ πρύμνησι νέεσσι

αὐτόν τ' ἰσχανάσχον ἐρητύοντό τε λαόν. (Ο 721 ff.)

3. When the outcome of the single combat between Paris and Menelaus in Γ has made a truce seem probable, Zeus must find a new way of bringing the two armies face to face with each other. Again he achieves his purpose without revealing his Plan. As the scholiast remarks, he throws the responsibility from his own shoulders by making Hera the cause of the renewal of hostilities. *He* is for the time interested only in bringing about a general engagement; the *poet* wishes to make us more familiar with the Achaean champions, especially with Diomedes, the dauntless and irresistible hero who at once wins our affection and, in the absence of Achilles, plays the leading rôle on the Achaean side until his wounding in Λ . But in this preliminary and (to the reader who is not familiar with the poem) vague step in the development of the Plan, the poet seems to have had another most important and definite purpose. This is to put before us in several aspects the Instrument by which the Plan is to be carried out. In the action of the first five books Hector is kept somewhat in the background. As commander-in-chief he must of course appear at the marshaling of the Trojan forces, and he must also make arrangements for the combat between Paris and Menelaus. But we notice that he is kept out of the Pandarus episode. Athena tells Pandarus (Δ 96) that if he slays Menelaus he will be doing a favor to Paris, not to Hector; and it is Aeneas, not Hector, who pairs with Pandarus in \mathbf{E} . In the same book (\mathbf{E} 494, 689) Hector makes no reply to Sarpedon, although in the entire *Iliad* he speaks more often than any other character except Achilles. Finally, although he is one of the chief actors in the scene in which the greatest exploit of Diomedes is described (\mathbf{E} 793 ff.), it is Ares, not Hector, on whom our attention is focused: Ares 'rages' (\mathbf{E} 717), not Hector, as later in the *Iliad*.¹ But early in the action of \mathbf{Z} Hector comes forward to play the leading rôle. It is worth while to notice the way in

¹ A small point is to be noted in this connection: in both \mathbf{E} and \mathbf{O} a god fights in person for the Trojans, and close to Hector; but while in \mathbf{E} (592) the poet tells us that the Trojans are led by Ares, in \mathbf{O} it is Hector who leads, not Apollo (\mathbf{O} 306).

which the poet transfers our attention to his hero on the Trojan side: Helenus addresses Aeneas and Hector, beginning with the words *Αἰνεία τε καὶ Ἑκτορ* (Z 75-77). But Aeneas neither says nor does anything in response: he fades from the scene, and from now on for many episodes Hector is the leading character on the Trojan side. The reason apparently is that Aeneas has been more prominent in the minds of the listener, and a transition is needed. In Z we become acquainted with Hector as son, brother, friend, husband, and father; in H, as courteous and brave — but not too brave — single champion in the ‘exhibition’ match with Aias, and in Θ, as bold charioteer.² The Instrument is ready to be used.

4. The Plan has now become clear in the mind of Zeus. At the beginning of Θ the battlefield has been cleared for its accomplishment. But its details are not announced³ until the close of the day (Θ 470-476): “For mighty Hector shall not cease from the fighting till Achilles rise up by the ships.”

5. There remains but one step in the development of the Plan before its execution: the Instrument must be informed of it, on the best of authority, and with its exact limits. This is done early on the third day of battle: Iris, sent by Zeus, tells Hector that Zeus gives him the might to slay “till he shall reach the ships and night come on” (Λ 207 ff.).

6. The third day of battle sees the Plan consummated. This is Hector’s brief day of glory; Hector himself calls it *ἄξιον ἡμῶν* (O 719). In reality its events should occupy two days (cf. Λ 84 with Π 777-779 and P 384). But an intervening night would ruin the *nexus* of the action. This has forced the poet to put into one long day both the fulfilment of the Plan and the transition from this thread of the narrative to that

² Cf. Θ 88 f., and see *Class. Phil.* xv, 296 f. Θ is in fact the book of the horse. The action begins with the harnessing of the bronze-hoofed steeds of Zeus (vs. 41), and ends with a picture of the Trojan horses munching white barley beside their chariots (564 f.). Nestor loses a horse, and Hector two charioteers. Cf. also vss. 59, 136, 185-197, 214, 254, 257, 348, 381 ff., 402 ff., 440, 492, 543 f.

³ Θ 9, *ὄφρα τάχιστα τελευτήσω τάδε ἔργα*. Notice the demonstrative, used for the third time to indicate the unrevealed *βουλή*.

of the Wrath. There is a structural weakness here, but it is one that the listener would not notice.

The story of the third day's fighting has been the happy hunting ground of critics. It has seemed to be a maze of episodes. But if we take as a clue the double thread of Plan and Instrument, with an occasional, and at the end clearly visible and continuous, use of the strand of the Wrath, the account becomes sufficiently coherent. The part which is devoted to the execution of the Plan (Λ -O) is given a certain degree of rhythm by the insertion of episodes (the Errand of Patroclus, Λ 596-848; the Tricking of Zeus, Ξ 153-351), and by the clearly marked steps in the success of Hector. In Λ and N his achievements are general rather than specific, for the *aristeia* of Agamemnon and of Idomeneus, respectively, hold our attention; once (in Ξ) he meets with a severe reverse; and twice (at the end of M and of O) the tale of his prowess reaches a climax with a vivid account of how he attains an objective. "Zeus gave superior glory to Hector. . . . So Hector sprang in (through the broken gate — which Zeus had helped him to shatter, M 450), his countenance like swift night; he gleamed with the terrible bronze that he wore about his flesh, and two spears were in his hands. No one, other than a god, could have faced him and held him back when he leaped within the walls: his eyes were flashing fire" (M 437, 462 ff.). "Heraged like unto Ares . . . foam gathered about his mouth, and his two eyes gleamed under his savage brows, and his helmet shook terribly about his cheeks as he fought . . . Zeus himself from the sky was his helper. . . . So Hector made for the dark-prowed ship, darting straight for it, and Zeus at his back drove him on with his own most mighty hand" (O 605-694). At the beginning of the account the poet, harking back to the proem, tells us that Zeus is about to send many mighty men to Hades (Λ 55);⁴ at the end of O the Achaeans are at last in the plight that Achilles desired (Λ 409 f.),

⁴ There are also at least two references back to the prayer of Thetis, N 347 ff., O 596 (cf. M 37 f.).

“huddled together and slaughtered at the sterns by the sea,” and Patroclus is already speeding back to Achilles to take the step that is to lead to the honoring of Achilles (cf. A 505-510) by the return of Briseis and the payment of a large indemnity. In this part of the poem above all others both the poet and his characters, Olympians, Achaeans, and Hector himself, recognize that Zeus is willing the victory and giving glory to “the Trojans *and to Hector*”—or, simply, “to Hector.”⁵ At the two climaxes (M 437, 450; O 610 f., 694 f.) Zeus in person helps his Instrument, and we are informed thrice of the limits which are to be set to the success of Hector (Λ 192 ff., O 59 ff., 596 ff.; cf. O 231, and Θ 473).

III

Professor Scott in one of his most brilliant hypotheses (*Unity of Homer*, 205-239; *A.J.P.* xxxv, 309 ff.) regards Hector not as a part of the legend, but as an invention of the poet. He argues *inter alia* (*Unity*, 233) that “Hector receives high praise in general terms, but the events of the *Iliad* give no warrant for assigning him a high place as a soldier.” Yet surely the poet might easily at will have made a great fighter out of a character even of his own invention. Of course, since Homer was a Greek and was telling the story for Greeks, he must subordinate the Trojan champion to the greater Achaean heroes. But in doing this he makes prominent the close relation between Hector’s success and the plan which Zeus conceived in fulfilment of his promise to Thetis. Hector is the only hero whom Zeus personally helps, making light the boulder which crushes the Achaean gate (M 450), and with his own

⁵ Specific recognition of Zeus’s assistance to Hector: by the poet, Λ 300, M 37 ff., 174, 255, 437, N 347, O 461, 694; by Poseidon, N 58; by Agamemnon, Ξ 72; by Thoas, O 292; by Hector, Λ 288 f., M 235, 241, N 154, O 493, 719. More general recognition of Hector’s prowess: by the poet, M 10, N 1, 120, O 303, 349, 744; by Zeus, O 15, 42; by Poseidon, N 123, Ξ 364, 375; by Idomeneus, N 316; by Patroclus, Λ 820; by Ajax, N 80, O 504; by Agamemnon, Ξ 44, 72; by Nestor, Ξ 52; by Odysseus, Λ 315.

hand urging Hector on (O 694 f.). It is Zeus who will not let Hector meet Agamemnon (Λ 163) or Ajax (Λ 543 f.) in battle. Furthermore, an instrument must be more or less passive, as Telemachus, for example, is in the *Odyssey*. How often Hector either is inert and needs to be aroused to action, for example, by Sarpedon (E 472) and by Glaucus (Π 537, P 142), or else requires the advice and direction of others: of Helenus (Z 77, H 47); Cebriones (Λ 521 ff.); Polydamas (M 60 ff., N 725 ff.)! ⁶ Finally, an instrument must not gain too much glory for itself: in Λ, as Professor Scott has observed, the honor of putting *hors de combat* any one of the five Achaean heroes, Agamemnon, Diomedes, Odysseus, Machaon, or Eurypylus, does not fall to Hector. In fact the poet tells us that the Achaeans would not have fallen back if *Paris* — not Hector — had not wounded Machaon (Λ 504 ff.). In M (290 ff.) we are told that the Trojans and valiant Hector would not have broken through the gates if Sarpedon had not swept the battlements clear of defenders — incidentally withdrawing the two Ajaxes to another part of the wall. There is likewise no glory for Hector, save in his own mind, in the slaying of Patroclus.

With the end of O the Plan, so far as it carries out the wish of Achilles (Λ 408-412), has been accomplished. But the honor of Achilles has not yet been restored, and he has not yet become reconciled with Agamemnon. To bring this about the poet designed the Patrocleia, which corresponds to the *μετάβασις* of Attic tragedy — an episode masterly in its conception, but somewhat faulty in some of the details of its execution. With the Patrocleia we are not concerned at present, for with the beginning of Π the poet needs to use no longer the subordinate threads of the Plan and the Instrument. The rest of the poem merely narrates the unlooked-for results of Wrath and Plan upon the Hero and the Instrument.

⁶ The Asius episode in M, to which so many critics take exception, has a legitimate function in the plot, namely, to illustrate what might have happened to Hector himself, but for the advice of Polydamas.

IV

In following the development of the *βουλὴ Διός* and of the poet's use of Hector, we have taken as an analogy the strands of a bond which holds the episodes together. We must now quit the figure — which perhaps we have stressed too much — and consider in a more general way the importance of the Plan of Zeus and of the character of Hector in the plot of the poem.

The dramatic quality of the *Iliad*, especially as contrasted with the narrative character of the *Odyssey*, was recognized by ancient critics. τῆς μὲν Ἰλιάδος . . . ὅλον τὸ σωματίον δραματικὸν ὑπεστήσατο καὶ ἐναγώνιον, τῆς δὲ Ὀδυσσεύας . . . τὸ πλεόν διηγηματικόν ([Longinus], *On the Sublime*, 9, 13). What the author meant by ἐναγώνιος he makes clear later (chap. 25; cf. 15, 9): ὅταν γε μὴν τὰ παρεληλυθότα τοῖς χρόνοις εἰσάγῃς ὥς γινόμενα καὶ παρόντα, οὐ διήγησιν ἔτι τὸν λόγον, ἀλλ' ἐναγώνιον πρᾶγμα ποιήσεις.⁷ This representation of past events as present and as happening is the essence of tragedy.⁸ The *Iliad* in this respect very nearly satisfies Aristotle's desideratum of the tragedy: δρώντων, καὶ οὐ δι' ἀπαγγελίας (*Poet.* 1449 b 26). But the *Iliad* was regarded as dramatic in the best sense also because of its singleness of theme. When Aristotle (*ib.* 1459 b 2) says that out of either Homeric poem only one tragedy can be made — or at most two — he apparently means the qualification of his first statement to apply only to the *Odyssey*,⁹ the plot of which he elsewhere (1453 a 31) recognizes as being double.¹⁰ The tragic theme of the *Iliad* is of course the Wrath of Achilles. Yet this theme is insufficient during the first part of the poem for two

⁷ So in Argumentum ad α (Cod. Ambros. E) the *Iliad* is described as ἐναγώνιος.

⁸ As Butcher remarks (*Aristotle's Theory of Poetry* [1895], 265 f.), "The epic is a story of the past, the drama a representation of the present."

⁹ Cf. Eust. 1, 22: δραματικώτερον ἐσχηματισμένη (sc. ἡ Ἰλιάς) διὰ τῆς μορφοειδοῦς μὲν, πολυπροσώπου δὲ ἀφηγήσεως.

¹⁰ In the *Odyssey* we also find two minor threads of the plot in the Plan of Athena and the Instrument of her Plan, Telemachus. And we notice that her Plan is in fact two Plans, and that both are carefully formulated for the reader: α 84-95, and ν 397-415.

reasons. In the first place the *Iliad*, like Dickens' *Bleak House*, is a great gallery of portraits, and time is required to develop these. Once Achilles is fighting again the other heroes are over-shadowed. But besides this, the Wrath must have both sufficient time and the proper circumstances so that it can blaze to its full capacity and then burn out enough to make the return of Achilles seem probable. During this time the unity of the plot is preserved by means of a gradual development of the Plan of Zeus, and by the deliberate and methodical introduction of Hector in so many aspects, and then by the account of his progress to the climax of his achievements, in ever closer dependence on the help of Zeus.

If objection is made that the first two or three steps in the development of the Plan are hardly steps at all, the objector must remember the generally recognized fact that for the sake of the poet's audience the story of fighting must not begin with disaster to the Achaeen arms, and also that Diomedes is made so prominent in Δ-Λ because in the absence of Achilles it is necessary to give the Achaeans a champion of outstanding prowess.

We do not intend to imply that the poet must consciously have used the threads of Plan and Instrument, but rather that he conceived one great tragic climax involving as chief actors Achilles, Patroclus, and Hector. To make this climax the more effective Hector, though an enemy, is made dear to the audience, as he was to the poet and to Zeus. But the very fact that he is an enemy makes this impossible, if it were not for the Plan of Zeus, which itself is the outcome of the Wrath. This conception of the *Iliad* does not prevent us from enjoying the episodes of the poem as independent parts,¹¹ but the unity of structure, to which the minor *σύνδεσμοι* of Plan and Instrument contribute largely, strengthens our belief that only one master mind could have conceived it.

¹¹ ὁ δὲ ποιητὴς εἰ καὶ δραματικῶς ἔγραψεν, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἔδραματούργησε σκηνηκῶς, Eust. 5, 13.